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# Persuasion Through Bitter Humor: Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Rhetoric in Internet Memes of Two Far-Right Groups in Finland

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the role of Internet memes in the communication of two far-right groups in Finland. The material consists of 426 memes posted by Finland First and the Soldiers of Odin between the years 2015 and 2017 on Facebook. Multimodal discourse analysis was applied to understand the contents, forms, and rhetorical functions communicated via the Internet memes. The analysis shows that the contents of the memes revolve around six themes: history, humor, mythology, symbols, news and mottos. By using Internet memes, the groups aim to construe a heroic imagined past, to lend legitimacy to the nationalist cause, to arouse moral anger and hate toward refugees, and to encourage the movements' followers to fight. We argue that, for the extreme groups, Internet memes are tools to crystallize their arguments in an easily shareable and concise form, which makes the memes useful tools in persuasion and mobilization, as well as attracting new audiences.

## Keywords

Internet memes, social media, multimodal analysis, rhetoric, nationalism

## Introduction

Social media has provided extreme movements on important platforms to organize, reach new audiences, and disseminate their message with loose control and at relatively low costs (Huntington, 2016). Utilizing virtual arenas to convey ideological messages has, on the one hand, provided a new set of tools for multimodal forms of persuasion (e.g., Pettersson & Sakki, 2017) and, on the other hand, required the groups to adapt their communication to the trends and tastes of virtual communities (Forchtner & Kolvraa, 2017). In order to understand different forms of multimodal messages and their persuasive aspect, more research is needed on the role of social media-based modes of political communication. This study focuses on a specific mode of social media communication—Internet memes—in the context of nationalist far-right rhetoric. Internet memes, which often means humorous videos, pictures, and collages for sharing, have become a popular form of communication on social media platforms, but the rhetorical effects of the memes are still largely unexplored (Davis et al., 2016; Jenkins, 2014). For minorities, for example, memes can serve as tools for building positive group identity (Gal et al., 2016), but they are also increasingly used to spread unfiltered racist and prejudiced content (Yoon, 2016). In this

article, we argue that Internet memes should be considered a specific mode of communication that utilizes multimodal combinations of different elements (e.g., text and images) and different registers of speech (e.g., humor and dissemination of information) to persuade and mobilize the audience.

More specifically, in this article, we aim to answer the following questions: (a) What are the contents and forms of the Internet memes shared by two Finnish far-right groups in Facebook? (b) What rhetorical functions do these memes serve for the groups? The article is structured as follows: after the literature review and description of the context of the study, we present the method and describe the material. In the “Results” section, we first give an overview of the contents (themes) of the analyzed Internet memes, then describe the analysis of the forms and functions of each theme. Finally, the results are discussed in the light of previous research.

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## Memes as a Form of Political Communication

The concept of the meme is often used to refer to the social dissemination of “ideas and images” (Davis et al., 2016, p. 66) that “shape and reflect general social mindsets” (Shifman, 2014, p. 4). In the context of new media environments, memes are typically understood as user-generated online content in the form of still images, videos, or animations, which are disseminated from person to person, especially on social media or other virtual platforms (e.g., Yoon, 2016). Shifman (2014, p. 41) has further defined Internet memes as digital items, which are intertextual by nature, share common characteristics in content and form, and are disseminated and imitated socially. For example, Huntington (2013, 2016) argues that, due to their widespread presence, Internet memes can be seen as a distinguishable mode of communication that can constitute separate virtual discourses.

Internet memes are often characterized by humor and their intention can be just to amuse the audience, but memes are also used to disseminate political arguments and ideologies (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006; Yoon, 2016). Previous research shows that irony and humor in Internet memes are used as tools to create extreme discourses: for example, Gal (2019) has highlighted the role of ironic humor in digital communication as a tool to empower the in-group and marginalize out-groups. By different extreme movements, memes are used to delegitimize dominant practices and to legitimize the practices of the group members. Ironic humor is one element characteristic of contemporary (youth) culture on the Internet. Exploiting irony in the social media communication of extreme groups can be seen as an example of the appropriation of styles and symbols to attract new audiences (Forchtner & Kølvrå, 2017). Internet memes spread through networks of users, which make them a potential way to reach a wide audience with minimal resources and without restrictive societal control. For these reasons, Davis et al. (2016) state that memes, along with other social media tools, are revolutionizing the way extreme groups act.

From a perspective of political rhetoric, Internet memes are tools to crystallize an argument in an easily shareable, concise, and often visual form. This feature makes memes useful tools in busy and congested everyday interaction (Hahner, 2013). The anonymity of memes and the fact that the responsibility for monitoring social media communication is partly conducted by other users have provided far-right and other extreme groups with new opportunities and platforms to disseminate their messages (Hatakka, 2019).

## Extreme Rhetoric on Social Media Platforms

Even though the rhetoric of the Internet memes of nationalist movements has rarely been studied, there is a wide body of literature concerning the movements’ rhetoric in traditional

and social media. As Levinger and Franklin Lytle (2001) argue, there are some widely shared rhetorical patterns that many nationalist movements rely on to mobilize their supporters: The most common is the triadic narrative pattern, in which idealized images of the past are juxtaposed with exaggerated representations of a degraded present and a utopian, harmonious future. In this rhetoric, the vision of an ideal past and references to history are needed to lend gravity and legitimacy to the nationalist cause. Rhetorically as important is the identification of the causes and sources of national decay in the present as well as the prescription of the specific actions required for the nation’s recovery in the future. In the same vein, previous research on Finnish nationalist rhetoric demonstrates how temporality is used as a resource in the nationalist argument: the construction of a glorious past *before* multiculturalism, a present threatened *by* multiculturalism, and future that may still be *saved from* multiculturalism (Pettersson & Sakki, 2017).

The research has often focused on one of the core elements of this rhetoric: its hostility toward immigrants and Islam. Research on immigrant-hostile and anti-Muslim political discourse shows that people deploy various discursive and rhetorical strategies in order to seem rational (e.g., Potter, 1996), unbiased (e.g., Billig, 1988), and representative of the “common people” (e.g., Rapley, 1998). In order for arguments that are hostile toward immigrants to seem rational and well-founded, the speaker may, moreover, refer to various factuality- and credibility-enhancing strategies (e.g., quantification, statistics) and to economic factors like the “costs of immigration” (e.g., Augoustinos et al., 1999; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). In general, previous research (Burke & Goodman, 2012; Holtz & Wagner, 2009) on online anti-immigrant discourse indicates a tendency to express more extreme and offensive statements on the Internet in comparison to face-to-face situations. This is explained by the minimization of stake (Edwards & Potter, 1992) and by deindividuation facilitated by a lack of identity-related information and the anonymity of the Internet (Yoon, 2016).

There have been few previous studies on the online rhetoric of extreme groups. For example, Bostdorff’s (2004) analysis of Ku Klux Klan (KKK) websites suggests that the group’s persuasive rhetoric is based on the use of inflammatory speech, religious imagery and language, exhortations to mobilize and take action, appeals to White masculinity, special attention to women and children, and the promotion of violence, but in a plausibly deniable manner. Billig (2001) has also analyzed the rhetoric of KKK websites and showed that racist humor presented as being “just a joke” functions both for enjoyment and for dehumanizing the target of the jokes, in this case, mainly Blacks and Jews. Unlike Bostdorff (2004) and Billig (2001), McNamee et al. (2010) conclude that hate groups’ messages mainly focus on educating others, encouraging participation, invoking divine privilege, and criticizing external groups and organizations, which together function to reinforce the hate group identity, reduce external

threats from outside parties, and recruit new members. While acknowledging the importance of incorporating visual images in analysis in future research, these previous studies are mainly limited to the analysis of text-based messages.

In the context of the United Kingdom, Burke (2017, 2018) has demonstrated how far-right groups use Facebook to create an image of “reasonable” political options and how the groups exploit visual communication to present evidence supporting their rhetoric. In a similar vein, the study by Richardson and Wodak (2009) of the political leaflets of right-wing parties in the United Kingdom and Austria argues that multimodal elements should be read together in order to fully uncover their racist and anti-Semitic message, as the message of the verbal and visual support and complement each other. Gal (2019) has recently focused on the role of ironic humor in social media in the context of the political conflict in Israel and shows how multimodal messages are used as “boundary objects” to create a sense of communion and segregation. Furthermore, in their analysis of German far-right visual communication in Facebook, Forchtner and Kølvråa (2017) show how, by strategic visual self-presentation, the new far-right is able to redefine the traditional totalitarian Nazi ideology in a modern way such that it appears appealing within the much more rude, ironic, and humorous language of contemporary youth cultures.

From the perspective of everyday knowledge, the power of visual images remains their ability to crystallize an abstract meaning in an easily disseminated form. Visual images are also a better way to appeal to emotions and emotive processing than are rational arguments. These characteristics, in addition to the vividness of certain images (e.g., photographs), can make visual communication rhetorically more powerful than verbal or textual messages (Joffé, 2008). However, visual and verbal messages seldom work independently and, for example, Internet memes are often composed of an image and a caption or a statement. As such, the present analysis provides an opportunity to advance our knowledge of the role played by the multimodal messages of Internet memes in far-right rhetoric.

## Context: Radical Nationalist Movements in Finland

In the 2010s, there has been growing support for the radical nationalist movements with an anti-immigration agenda in Finland. As a result of the conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and other areas in 2014 and 2015, the number of people seeking asylum in Finland momentarily increased, which in turn activated several radical anti-immigration groups. The two groups analyzed in this study rose to public awareness in 2015. They were selected objects of analysis as they both actively used social media and, by the time of the data collection (2017), they had open Facebook groups in which the material was shared. Both of the movements have exploited multimodal ways of communication, for example, photographs, videos, and memes,

in social media in a manner that is relatively new in the Finnish political sphere, to organize and disseminate their agenda and mobilize their supporters (e.g., Ekman, 2018).

*Suomi ensin* (Finland First) was registered on the Finnish register of associations in 2016. The agenda of the movement includes criticism of the European Union (EU), demands for Finland to leave the EU, and tightening of border controls in Finland. On the website of the movement, the group defines itself as “a people’s movement . . . We always give priority to Finns’ interests in political issues” (Retrieved from: <https://suomiensin.fi>).

The other group, *Soldiers of Odin*, have been setting up “street patrols” since 2015. Voluntary patrols aroused a debate in the Finnish media in which they were labeled a far-right group and Neo-Nazis. According to the *Helsingin Sanomat* (2016a) newspaper, *Soldiers of Odin* defined themselves as “a nationalist movement fighting for a white Finland.” The way the movement exploited social media was claimed to be the reason for wide propagation of its message (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 2016b).

Far-right and other extreme groups are increasingly using social media as a vehicle to spread their ideas and ideology (Davis et al., 2016; Ekman, 2018; Hatakka, 2019). In the Finnish context, Horsti (2015) has shown that the change of mediascape at least partially explains the rise of anti-immigration movements from marginal political actors to the center of the political sphere. This provides a timely starting point for the investigation of the rhetoric of Internet memes. In this study, we aim to explore how the multimodal nature of Internet memes is used as a tool for the extreme rhetoric and mobilization of supporters of the groups. In pursuit of this goal, two questions are posed to guide this study:

1. What are the contents and forms of the Internet memes shared by two Finnish far-right groups in Facebook?
2. What rhetorical functions do these memes serve for the groups?

## Material and Method

The two groups, Finland First and Soldiers of Odin, employed image-based Internet memes in their communication in Facebook. The memes posted and shared in the public Facebook groups were mainly collages comprising one or more images (a graphic image or a photograph) accompanied by one or more written sentences. In addition, the groups posted written messages and photos on Facebook and videos on YouTube. Only material sharing a common form (an image and text) were included in the research material in this study.

A total of 426 Internet memes meeting the set criteria were collected (Finland First  $N=209$ ; Soldiers of Odin  $N=217$ ) from the public Facebook groups administered by the movements (Retrieved from: <https://facebook.com/soldiersofodin/>; <https://facebook.com/Suomi-Ensin>). Material



was collected by taking screenshots using a scraping application in the web browser (see e.g., Burke, 2018). The material was collected from November 2017 to January 2018 and includes material posted from January 2015 to the collection date, so the research material reflects the time when the extreme movements were gaining attention in the context of the so-called “refugee crisis” in Finland (Wahlbeck, 2019). By the time of writing this article, the material also recounts the history of anti-immigration extreme movements as the Facebook sites of both groups have been removed. The material posted and shared in them were available for 2–3 years. It is difficult to estimate the audience a single meme got at the time it was posted, and, in this study, the interest is more in the rhetorical and ideological message conveyed by the overall material. However, the number of followers of the Facebook groups gives an idea of the scale of the audience: The Soldiers of Odin Finland had 49,000 followers and Finland First 18,000 on the date of data gathering, although not all followers may have been supporters of the groups.

### Analytic Procedure

Multimodal discourse analysis was the principal approach used to answer the research questions. Multimodal discourse analysis refers broadly to approaches in which the study of language is extended to the study of other resources such as images (O’Halloran, 2011). Kress (2012) formulates the main aim of multimodal discourse analysis as being an approach to cultural products in which “all modes are framed as one field, as one domain” (p. 38). In other words, the meaning of an analytic unit, in this study an Internet meme, is understood to comprise all its elements, for example, a juxtaposition of images and accompanying text. Both Kress (2012) and O’Halloran (2011) emphasize the social semiotic roots of the approach, which also guides the researcher to look at the rhetorical aspect of the analyzed material.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have presented a framework for the semiotic analysis of multimodal communication. They highlight that three meta-semiotic tasks of the images should be considered: the representational, compositional, and interpersonal metafunctions. These three aspects are dynamically related and together they construct the meaning and ideological function of the visual image. The people, places, and objects within an image construct the content, the representational metafunction. Interpersonal and compositional characteristics constitute the performative functions. The analysis of the interpersonal metafunction entails considering the actions of the participants in the production and viewing of an image (the creator, the characters in an image, and the audience). Furthermore, Kress (2012) emphasizes the need to consider the socially shaped cultural modal resources of the communication, such as size, color, layout, writing, image, and font, and to interpret the role of each resource (e.g., image shows, and writing describes).

In practice, in this study, the contents of the memes were analyzed by first familiarizing ourselves with the material by going through the collected 426 Internet memes. During the first round of analysis, we generated initial notes describing the contents of the memes. After that, we classified the memes into broader themes based on their identified main content. The primary meaning, that is, the main content, was defined by considering all the components of the meme: its visual message and written text. The same meme could have characteristics from several themes, for example, presenting elements of nature and history. In these cases, the main content was discussed between the researchers, and the memes for which interpretation could not be agreed on after discussion were placed under “Other memes” (for thematic analysis, see Flick, 2014).

Having distinguished the main contents and thematic structure of the material, we continued with a more detailed exploration of the *forms* and *functions* of the different themes. To analyze the forms, we elaborated on how different resources such as size, color, layout, and font (Kress, 2012) became tied together and contributed to the construction of the memes. As the desirable meaning of an image is often strengthened with a verbal explanation, we also paid special attention to the text accompanying the visual content. On the third level of analysis, we combined the analyses of content and form, analyzing the images in their immediate and broader argumentative context. Following the example of Hakoköngäs and Sakki (2019), we argue that interpretation of these elements together is a way to interpret the rhetorical *functions* conveyed by the material. In the analysis of persuasion, our focus was on the rhetorical organization of the memes, that is, what the rhetorical forms were, such as, factuality- and credibility-enhancing strategies (e.g., Potter, 1996), and strategies of persuasion, such as, out-group derogation or enhancement of in-group identity (e.g., Pettersson & Sakki, 2017), and what the memes made use of and for what purposes.

### Results: Multimodal Construction of Rhetoric in Internet Memes

As a result of the first step of analysis, we identified six themes describing the main *contents* of the memes. The visual content of the communication by both groups revolved around several topics such as national history and mythology. Humor was a common content for both movements, targeting Islam, immigrants, political opponents, and the EU. Both groups also actively shared memes in which symbols, such as their logo or Finnish flag, had a central position. Some memes had a more informative role and were identified as “news.” Five of the themes were used by both groups. In addition, the Soldiers of Odin used one specific theme (mottos) that was not used by Finland First. The themes are presented in Table 1.

In what follows, we will first describe the *content* of each theme, after which we move to a deeper analysis of the *forms*

**Table 1.** Themes of the Internet Memes of Soldiers of Odin and Finland First (N=426).

Soldiers of Odin (SOO) (N=217)	Finland First (FF) (N=209)
1. History (11)	1. History (38)
2. Humor (55)	2. Humor (17)
3. Mythology (26)	3. Mythology (23)
4. Symbols (29)	4. Symbols (97)
5. News (47)	5. News (15)
6. Mottos (17)	
Other (Miscellaneous) (32)	Other (Miscellaneous) (19)

(Kress, 2012) and *functions* (e.g., Pettersson & Sakki, 2017; Potter, 1996) of the themes. From the perspective of multi-modal discourse analysis, the dimensions of content, form, and function are intertwined (Kress, 2012; O'Halloran, 2011). To avoid repetition, we present the analysis of each dimension together in the same sub-chapters. We demonstrate the analysis of the content, forms, and functions of each theme by presenting examples of the memes posted by the groups in Facebook.

### History in Memes

In both groups, Internet memes drawing from history referred typically to certain historical periods (e.g., “1939–1945”), to historical characters (e.g., President Kekkonen), to pieces of Finnish art, and to the Finnish Markka, the predecessor of the Euro. The form of the memes usually included a well-known historical image in the form of a photograph or image of a painting and a text written in capitals over the image. Figure 1 shows a typical image of the theme.

The multimodal form of the meme comprises a black-and-white photograph depicting people dressed in white, holding rifles and lying in the snow, with a captioned text over the image posing the question “Were they racists?” The color of the image refers to the history, and the cultural connotation in Finland connects the white-dressed people to the Winter War in 1939 and Finnish soldiers fighting back against the Soviet Union. As the war is culturally often seen as legitimate defense in Finland, it is justified to interpret the text added to the image as posing a rhetorical question and comparing the past to the present situation in which nationalist movements are described as racists. The central place and captioning of the text (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) emphasize the analogy that serves as a vehicle for the rejection of all racist accusations as, again according to the cultural connotation, no one would deny the righteousness of the Finnish soldiers in the Winter War.

In general, the war works as a metaphor implying the risk of losing control over immigration (van der Valk, 2003). The war images also serve to arouse national pride and remind people of the sacrifices of past generations. In the memes,

**Figure 1.** Posted: 23 November 2015 (Were they racists?).

Source. Retrieved from: <https://facebook.com/Suomi-Ensin>

the rhetorical aim of making an association between the past and the movements' objectives in the present is explicit: the past soldiers are presented as brave and responsible, while, in contrast, the present refugees represent cowardice. The historical analogue in Figure 1 also illustrates how war is used to argue that the nation has a right to defend its existence (Pettersson & Sakki, 2017).

In general, the use of historical images as material in memes is part of selective remembering. In addition to images of wars, the photos of President Kekkonen (1900–1986) are used by both groups. The memes present him as a strong leader who, according to the added texts in the memes, holds clear nationalist opinions. For example, the classic statement of nationalist movements (e.g., Sakki & Pettersson, 2016) “When in Rome, do as the Romans do or leave Rome” (Finland First, 25 May 2015), when put in the mouth of a historical figure aims to legitimize far-right groups' ideas that immigrants should follow a Finnish way of life.

To summarize: the content of history-related memes typically has the form on a historical image and a text that creates a rhetorical function, inviting the audience to interpret the image as an analogy, to compare the present situation to the past, and think that the agenda of the present radical groups is legitimate. Some memes may also arouse either anger or a feeling of nostalgia: that things were somehow better in previous times (Levinger & Franklin Lytle, 2001).

### Humor in Memes

Quirky humor and satire are often considered characteristics of Internet memes (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). In the present material, many themes also had elements that could be interpreted in the first instance as aiming to amuse. The form of humorous memes in the present material includes caricatures and cartoons, exaggerated alignment of images, hyperbola, parodies, pastiches, and image manipulations that make opponents of the movements look ridiculous. The fonts and



**Figure 2.** Posted: 22 March 2017 (War children in 1939–1945/“War children” 2015–2016). (Faces made unidentifiable by researchers.)

Source. Retrieved from: <https://facebook.com/soldiersofodin/>

colors used in the theme “humor” varied more than in other themes. The memes employed humor mainly to target Islam or Muslims, immigrants, and refugees or political opponents (e.g., leftists) or the EU and Finnish politicians. Figure 2 demonstrates the use of the alignment of images to construe a bitter humor.

The multimodal form of the meme includes a collage of two photographs, texts, and the logo of the “National Front,” another radical nationalist group, indicating that the meme is borrowed from their website. The rhetorical function of the meme is created by juxtaposing two images: a black-and-white historical image with typewriter-like text “War children in 1939–1945” referring to Finnish children who were sent to the security of Sweden during WWII, and a color image with the text “War children’ 2015–2016.” Quotation marks in the latter indicate the ironic tone. The use of the historical image aims to appeal to the emotions and shared traumatic collective memories, that is, the evacuation of Finnish children during WWII. The empathy aroused by the old photo showing serious-looking children is in high contrast with the image below portraying young men smiling and taking a selfie. By using visual documentation, the meme provides direct evidence without any need for more reasoning. The meme demonstrates the common rhetorical function of humorous memes, not just to amuse the audience but to arouse rage. Two emotional tones are intertwined in the meme, and humor and hatred go hand in hand as has been suggested in previous research (Billig, 2001; Weaver, 2016).

The meme also demonstrates a rhetorical strategy in which Finland is portrayed as a naïve victim exploited by refugees and other countries. In line with several previous studies on anti-immigrant discourse (e.g., Lynn & Lea, 2003), immigrants and refugees are also presented as crooks who try to take advantage of the host country. References to pedophilia, interference with animals, and assaults on women are commonly used topics in the rhetoric that aims to arouse disgust and rage (e.g., Burke, 2018; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016).

In line with previous studies on nationalist, (populist) rhetoric (e.g., Sakki et al., 2018), the opponents of the movements are also common targets of mockery in the memes: mainstream media, police forces, and politicians are typically presented as incapable and unreliable. Memes employing a self-ironic tone place the extreme groups in the role of a superhero such as Batman. In general, these memes function rhetorically to question the reliability of the rulers and elite, and to present the movements as a real alternative to the corrupt public forces.

To summarize, in the present material, humor was the main content in the memes employing caricatures and exaggerated images as a rhetorical device to attack the “others” and mock critics of the groups. The humor created an image of Finland as a benevolent but naïve country exploited by foreigners and corrupt politicians. The goal of this humor is to arouse anger and question the credibility of those in power.

### Mythology in Memes

The content of the memes defined as mythology-based depicted an imagined Finnish past or fantasy worlds. They include images of mythical heroes, Viking warriors, quotes from Scandinavian mythology, images of the Finnish national epic (Kalevala), and references to modern fantasy movies. The form of the memes resembled that presented in the context of history, typically employing a painted or photographed image accompanied by a text emphasizing the intended message. Figure 3 shows the use of mythology in the radical groups’ communication:

Figure 3 shows a portrait of a famous Finnish artist, Akseli Gallen-Kallela, painted in 1896. The painting depicts a scene from the national epic in which the hero Väinämöinen is defending himself against the evil Louhi. The connotation of the original painting, defending against an external enemy, is shifted to present-day Finland by text stating: “Finland First/ We will not surrender or give in!” “Finland First” presented above indicates the main message (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and is an intertextual reference to President Trump’s US policy of “America First,” emphasizing nationalism and protectionism. The latter part of the text “We will not surrender or give in!,” provides additional information which, in the context of the national epic, implies that Finns have always defended themselves tenaciously (compare to Figure 1) and at present, the nation is under attack from an unnamed foe.





**Figure 3.** Posted: 28 February 2017 (Finland First/We will not surrender, not give in!).

Source. Retrieved from: <https://facebook.com/Suomi-Ensin>

The rhetorical function of mythology provides an opportunity to create a mythical narrative to explain the existence of the far-right groups and legitimize their actions. It draws from the widely shared cultural knowledge and collective memories of the nation. In general, in the memes drawing from mythology, the groups argue that Western society is in decline and in the imageries such as in Figure 3, the groups indicate that they represent mythical heroes aiming to save the country and its culture.

To summarize, the memes referring to mythologies had a form very similar to those using history as a reference point. Illustrations of Finnish and Norse national epics in particular were used accompanied by statements that connected the content of the image to the present situation. Rhetorically, the content and form served to present radical groups as the continuation of a long tradition striving to preserve the Finnish nation.

### Symbols in Memes

Memes presenting symbols as their main content were similar in both movements. The symbols included the logo of the group, the Finnish flag, and coat of arms, accompanied by a statement like “Keep calm and love Finland” (Soldiers of Odin, 12 January 2016). The form of the memes comprised an easily recognizable visual element (such as the flag) and a short text reflecting national pride or enthusiasm for the groups’ action. Figure 4 shows a symbol used as content in the memes.

The meme depicts a human silhouette saluting the Finnish flag. The visual side creates a form comprising a sense of solemnity, which is supported by the serious and striking



**Figure 4.** Posted 17 March 2016 (Support Them. They Support You. Soldiers of Odin Finland).

Source. Retrieved from: <https://facebook.com/soldiersofodin/>

command: “Support Them” referring to the group whose logo and name is presented below. Furthermore, the text states “They Support You,” leaving open the question of whether the final message is forcing “Support them *because* they support you” or inviting “Support them *so they will* support you.” In both cases, along with the flag, the meme gives the impression that the group is willing to help patriotic Finns. The colors of the Finnish flag and the salute are parts of the multimodal construction of the message of the meme. The general rhetorical function of the symbols in the present context seems to be to appeal to national pride and enhance positive in-group identity. National symbols are used to delineate the group and its essence.

To summarize, in the present material, the memes employing symbols have the form of the logo of a group or a visual sign referring to Finland, accompanied by a text encouraging the group’s supporters. The rhetorical functions are, in addition to delineating the groups (like-minded Finns), concretizing the basic values of the movements: nationalism and patriotism.

### News in Memes

In the analyzed material, there is a distinctive group of memes spreading information addressing the activity of the groups or re-interpreting immigrant- and refugee-related news from other sources (e.g., questioning material taken from “mainstream” media). The form of this material, which typically includes a photograph and caption, visually resembles the form of the themes analyzed above. However, instead of amusing or creating a history-based credibility for





**Figure 5.** Posted: 20 May 2016 (A paid homeware meal in the city of Turku/A free meal in an asylum-seekers reception center). (Face made unidentifiable by researchers.)

Source. Retrieved from: <https://facebook.com/soldiersofodin/>

the group, the news had a more timely and informative tone. Figure 5 shows the theme “News” in the use of the groups.

The multimodal form of Figure 5 comprises the juxtaposition of two-color images presenting a spare meal and a smiling man with a hearty meal. These images are accompanied by declaratory captions stating that the former is “a paid homeware meal in the city of Turku” and the latter, “a free meal in an asylum-seekers’ reception centre.” The photographs look realistic, the font of the text also implies factuality and the similar font connects the two images. The form serves to downplay the role of the speaker’s subjectivity and to increase the air of credibility and matter-of-factness of the argument (e.g., Potter, 1996; Verkuyten, 2013). These memes create an illusory direct causality between the Other and, in Figure 5, the claimed bad treatment of Finnish people. The contrast between the spare meal and smiling asylum-seeker creates a tension in the meme (compare to Figure 2). In this sense, the rhetorical function of the memes could be interpreted as arousing dissatisfaction and anger.

In addition to using photographs, the factual nature of the news memes is created by sharing selected polls and charts.

They may illustrate, for example, the proportion of the European population resisting the EU (Finland First, 8 June 2016) or how many Finns are demanding the closing of national borders (Finland First, 24 September 2015). In line with previous research, citing statistics provides justification and persuasive value to an argument by indicating objectivity and scientific certainty (Potter, 1996; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). What is common in the use of news is that the original sources and credibility of the statistics and photographs cannot be identified. That is to say, the memes address only the issues that support the agenda of the movements.

To summarize, the content of the news in memes comprises photographs and descriptive text. The form creates connotations of factuality and journalism. The rhetorical function of this type of meme is to persuade the audience by presenting evidence of inequity in the form of photographs or by re-interpreting messages from other sources. Overall, these memes serve to give a negative Other presentation (e.g., Sakki & Pettersson, 2016; van Dijk, 1993; Wood & Finlay, 2008).

### Mottos in Memes

In the communication of the group Soldiers of Odin, mottos or ideological slogans form a distinctive type of meme. Mottos are types of memes in which the text plays the main role. Figure 6 shows a text-based meme.

The multimodal form of the meme includes small logos of the group and text: “The corrupt fear us. The honest support us. The heroic join us.” and an invitation: “Join your local SOO chapter today.” The text is graphical in form, emphasizing the words: “Fear us.,” “Support us.” and “Join us.” The text categorizes people into three groups with a negative (corrupt) or positive (honest, heroic) connotation. The invitation to join assumes that people want to identify positively. The memes in general are characterized by sharing and modifying, and Figure 6 is actually copied from Anonymous (an international Internet activism group) and given the Soldiers of Odin’s attributes.

In a similar manner to the context of symbols in memes, a motto’s rhetorical function is to state the central aims and values of the movement in a brief and easily memorable form. As Figure 6 shows, the phrases can be borrowed from other groups and edited to fit the present purpose. The multimodal form of the meme is used mainly to emphasize the message and make the text look more appealing and interesting.

### Discussion

In this article, we explored the content, form, and rhetorical functions of Internet memes used by two far-right groups in Finland between 2015 and 2017. The historical context of the creation and sharing the memes is located within the so-called “refugee crisis” in Europe in 2015–2017 and the public discussion addressing it in Finland during that time. The



**Figure 6.** Posted: 9 May 2016 (The corrupt fear us. The honest support us. The heroic join us. Join your local SOO chapter today).

Source. Retrieved from: <https://facebook.com/soldiersofodin/>

groups in which the memes were originally posted were later removed from Facebook. The material and analysis document a certain period in Finnish far-right movements' rhetoric, but in the sense of the contents, forms, and functions, the communication is also related to the global trend of adapting modes of social media communication to disseminate extremist ideologies (e.g., Burke, 2018; Davis et al., 2016; Forchtner & Kølvråa, 2017; Yoon, 2016).

To answer the research questions, we applied multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, 2012; O'Halloran, 2011), which pays particular attention to the social semiotic formation of the meaning of a multimodal message. We identified six main content types in the memes: (a) history, (b) humor, (c) mythology, (d) symbols, (e) news, and (f) mottos. In the present material, the multimodal form of the message mainly comprised a combination of images (e.g., photographs, paintings) and the graphical presentation of text. Different types of content were characterized by different forms. For example, news employed a more factual form than humor by using photographs as evidence. Multimodal content and forms together served rhetorical functions such as arousing moral anger and dissatisfaction (i.e., *pathos*, appealing to emotions) or to justify the groups' arguments with visual

evidence (i.e., *logos*, appealing to reasoning). In general, we contend that the rhetorical devices in the analyzed memes combined to derogate the Other and to arouse moral rage against it, to provide history and legitimacy to the in-group and thus reinforce in-group identity, and to recruit like-minded supporters.

Previous studies of extreme movement rhetoric (e.g., Augoustinos et al., 1999) and their online rhetoric (e.g., Bostdorff, 2004; McNamee et al., 2010; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016) have suggested partly similar functions to this study. Nevertheless, while the earlier research focused mainly on textual persuasion (see, for example, Gal, 2019; Yoon, 2016), this study shows that the old rhetorical strategies are creatively adapted to a changing communication environment such as the mode of Internet memes. Furthermore, this study has demonstrated the possibilities of multimodal discourse analysis in exploring the different dimensions of rhetoric, combining textual, visual, and graphical elements. This, we argue, is a topical research area due to the rapid growth of multimodally mediated communication in social media.

In addition, while previous research has examined the content and functions of rhetoric, this study has also focused on rhetorical form in the context of social media communication. Even though the strategies are old, the forms, for example, the selection of font or the layout of the message (Kress, 2012), bring new elements into the communication strategies of extreme groups. With a relatively simple multimodal combination of text and images, the groups managed to create a persuasive discourse that exploited deep-rooted national narratives (e.g., the Winter War) and activated strong emotions such as moral anger by presenting evidence of present social disadvantage. By employing different rhetorical strategies, the communication in memes had the potential to attract new audiences. This interpretation echoes Forchtner's and Kølvråa's (2017) study showing how the new extreme right in Germany is able to redefine the Nazi ideology in social media in a modern way, adopting the tools and style of contemporary youth cultures.

One of the central findings of the study is that, in line with previous research (Levinger & Franklin Lytle, 2001; Mols & Jetten, 2014), the far-right groups are using history to legitimize their presence in the present (and their actions in the future). The use of history and references to mythology in the memes resemble Mols and Jetten (2014), finding out how the past is strategically used to justify present claims and to create heroic glory for the nation. In the historical juxtapositions, the present situation is paralleled with past conflicts: according to the groups, the nation is currently at war even though people do not realize it. Only the informed activists are able to see and resist the present threat. Intriguingly, as our study suggests, mythology and symbols in particular are rhetorical devices that illustrate the basic values and essence of these nationalist movements—they provide them with a history and thus legitimize their existence. At the same time, the movements emphasize their ordinariness and appeal to

the common sense of the audience (Rapley, 1998; Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). Acting “on behalf of the people” is clear content in the communication of Soldiers of Odin, as they became famous for “street patrols” (Ekman, 2018).

In general, the rhetoric of the Finnish far-right groups has similarities with other Nordic radical movements: immigration and the welfare state are presented as being mutually exclusive, Islam as submissive and “islamisation” as threatening Western culture. Internal enemy, multiculturalist, “mainstream” politicians, and media are presented as apostates that accuse movements of being racist, but who are actually themselves intolerant. The in-group, the members of the movements, and their followers are in turn presented as martyrs and the real defenders of the nation (e.g., Figure 1: “Were they racists?”) (Sakki & Pettersson, 2016). This kind of rhetoric echoes populist far-right communication based on creating antagonistic divisions between “us” the people and “them” political opponents, mainstream media, and immigrants (e.g., Sakki & Pettersson, 2016), and drawing upon and constructing collective emotions of fear and threat (e.g., Wodak, 2015) and, in this study, particularly humor and moral anger (Billig, 2001).

## Conclusion

The analyzed memes of two far-right groups constituted a distinctive multimodal discourse (Huntington, 2013, 2016) employing both visual and textual persuasion and appealing to emotions and reasoning (see also: Hahner, 2013; Joffé, 2008). The discourse in the memes aimed to challenge the present immigration policy and balance of power in Finnish society. We suggest that looking at Internet memes as a distinctive form of communication (in comparison to written excerpts such as blogs and chat discussions) makes it possible to analyze broader multimodal forms and persuasive ideological functions behind social media communication. Multimodal discourse analysis (Kress, 2012; O’Halloran, 2011) was found to be a useful approach to making sense of various memes.

Even though the non-hierarchic nature of social media can make Internet memes into a tool for polyvocal discussion, the present analysis shows that communication can also be quite univocal. The groups seem accustomed to using social media. They have adopted the “language” of the present virtual communities for their own purposes to construct an “imagined community” and a positive in-group identity (see also: Gal, 2019; Gal et al., 2016). However, in the case of the analyzed groups, this group identity was exclusive and discriminatory in its origin. According to our analysis, the far-right groups used the multimodal form of Internet memes to crystallize their ideology and values in the easily shareable and concise form of Internet memes. Behind the humorous and ironic tone characteristic to present youth cultures (Forchtner & Kølvrå, 2017), the memes’ target is to mobilize supporters of far-right groups and attract new audiences.

Humor has been noted previously as a central content of the memes (Davis et al., 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). When used by extreme groups, the humor seems to acquire a form of bitter irony, which actually brings a persuasive dimension to the joking (Billig, 2001; Gal, 2019; Weaver, 2016; Yoon, 2016). Analyzing the social media discussions aroused by the provocative humor would broaden our understanding of the interpersonal metafunction(s) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) of multimodal rhetoric and how delegitimizing discourses (Davis et al., 2016) are formed. In general, what distinguishes Internet memes from the more traditional forms of disseminating persuasive messages is the opportunity to react to and comment on the posts and thus participate in the definition of their meaning. The analysis on how people react to the multimodal messages, and what, for example, makes people support and share prejudiced material, should be a topic for future research.

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